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SUBJECT: AWAMI LEAGUE DENIES RECEIVING COMPROMISE PACKAGE

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 D.

¶1. (C) Late December 19, presidential adviser Mukhles Rahman Chowdhury told us that a caretaker government proposal has been delivered to the leaders of the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The proposal called for Hasina's written commitment to participate in elections within the 90-day timeframe and not make further demands in exchange for: 1) a voter list based on both the 2001 list and this year's supplemental lists that would be available for review in all districts and could be updated until the day before election day; 2) a new election schedule that slips the nomination deadline three days to December 24; and 3) sending on leave controversial Election Commissioner Zakaria.

¶2. (C) Mukhles stated that the proposal would be considered today by the Awami League Presidium, and urged us to encourage the Awami League to consider it favorably.

¶3. (C) Both AL Presidium Member Kazi Zafarullah and Saber Hussain Chowdhury, Sheikh Hasina's political secretary, denied to us they have received any proposal, though they noted that rumors of a package like this have been circulating for several days.

¶4. (C) Zafarullah characterized the putative proposal as "too little, too late." Sheikh Hasina, he said, is prepared to talk about any proposal, but only after the government cancels the election schedule. Hasina's failure to repeat at yesterday's rally the demand for a 45-day delay in the election was meant to signal flexibility on the extent of, not the need for, a delay. He reiterated that the Awami League's principal demands are a rectified voter list, a reconstituted Election Commission, and changes in local election personnel, but acknowledged that the demands for transparent voter boxes and a voter list with photos are not feasible.

¶5. (C) Zafarullah refuted growing speculation that the Awami League wants an election delay because it needs more time to sort out its nominees and seat sharing arrangements with its many coalition partners. He claimed he had just left Sheikh Hasina, where together they had finalized the list of party nominees. However, he subsequently backtracked to say it was just a short-list of two nominees per seat and that the final interviewing process would still take at least another week.

¶6. (C) Comment: Whether out of principle or practical organizational necessity, the Awami League seems ill prepared to contest in January. The question may become whether the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is prepared to push on without the Awami League or whether it would wait to avoid a disruptive opposition boycott. The conventional wisdom has been that whichever party builds the biggest coalition will win the election, which was why the BNP, despite its many

problems, still seemed to be the party to beat, thanks to its partnership with Jamaat Islami. If the BNP believes the Awami League's new "grand coalition" is for real, its incentive to push on would be considerable.

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